

Commentary



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Russia's war in Ukraine: Challenging the future of Euro-Atlantic security

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Introduction

President Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine is analogous with fighting a new Cold War; in other words, it represents an existential confrontation between Russia and the West. On countless occasions (Putin 2022), he implicated NATO as responsible for backing "neo-Nazis" in Ukraine, making his aggression a pretext for defending Russian speakers in the Donbas and Russians in general by military means.

The war is also a chance to reconstitute Russia's global power status by forcibly subjugating Ukraine back to the Kremlin's orbit – a democratic and Eurocentric Ukraine being the antithesis of Putin's authoritarian Russia. The eminent American strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski (1994) once observed, "Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire." Steeped in an extreme war ideology calling for "de-nazification" and "extermination," conquering Ukraine is the first phase in a process of imperialist revisionism that includes gaining more influence in Europe.

Raging now for four months, the unprovoked war of attrition transformed Europe. It overturned the continent's security architecture, united Ukraini-

an national identity, resurrected the European Union's (EU) foreign policy, and strengthened NATO's reaction to a common threat. Although tactical Russian losses suffered in the field at the hands of determined Ukrainians (with some estimates of 15-20,000 dead since February 24, 2022) and political miscalculations for a quick victory are positive signs that Putin can be stopped, an armistice and binding peace may still be months, if not years, away.

This, however, should not stop the West from strengthening the Euro-Atlantic community in preparation for the new post-war political landscape and reality. Returning to a "business as usual" mindset with an even more hostile Putin is out of the question – doing so would only result in a repeat of war in Europe within the next decade. The West must contain an ideologically dangerous, neo-imperialist Russia under a Putinist regime, while at the same time bolstering European security on key areas, including cultivating a prosperous, western-oriented sovereign Ukraine. Failure to check authoritarian threats when they arise only emboldens others like China, Iran, or North Korea to act with impunity in dismantling the rules-based order.

Ukraine winning

Western leaders realized that Ukraine winning is a strategic priority for collective Euro-Atlantic security. Joe Biden, Justin Trudeau, Boris Johnson, and Ursula von der Leyen all publicly stated that Putin must fail and Ukraine win. The most outspoken has been Poland's Andrzej Duda, who suggested applying brutal strength "because only brutal strength, brutal power is able to stop Russia" (Youssef and Hinshaw 2022). In military terms, this means seeing Russian forces pushed back from all territory they occupied after February 24, 2022 at the very least, or since 2014 at the most; the former the minimum that Kyiv plans on achieving to ensure a strong hand before engaging with Russia in peace talks (Hall and Olearchyk 2022). Supporting Ukraine's objectives and its settlement conditions is key. Officials in Kyiv should not be forced by the West to sue for an immediate ceasefire in fear of escalating tensions. Russia must pay dearly for Putin's folly.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin urged to weaken Russia's capabilities to the degree that it is unable of committing future acts of aggression toward Ukraine or any NATO state (Sanger 2022). This means preventing Putin from freezing the conflict and slowly grinding forward to hold the territorial corridor along the Black Sea while relentlessly expanding in the Donbas. Such a scenario would lead to Ukraine's further destabilization, resulting in more innocent killing and the destruction of critical infrastructure, while allowing Putin to continue threatening the West and regrouping his forces for a future attack.

Successes in the field, thanks to stocks of crucial weapons supplied to Kyiv, have increased Ukrainian capabilities – inflicting significant losses to Russian tanks and armoured vehicles – and, in turn, solidified their motivation and tenacity to not only fight, but win. It is convinced many in the West (Boot 2022) that, regardless of Putin’s threats against those supplying Kyiv (e.g., by chemical or nuclear attacks), the provision of heavy weaponry is critical for Ukraine to stop Russian long-range artillery and missile strikes in the possibly decisive theatre of the east and south of Ukraine; territory that Putin aims to seize by attrition. Quick delivery of sophisticated weaponry and intense training in using them will further embolden the Ukrainian will to win (Gibbons-Neff and Schmitt 2022).

For the West, Ukraine winning must be synonymous with thwarting Putin’s dangerous authoritarian war ideology from mutating into a fascist war of destruction (Snyder 2022) – one based on a racist, genocidal policy of annexing European territory by “cleansing,” “exterminating” and “liquidating” an ethnic population. He’s in the process of doing so by ordering Russian forces to commit brutal war crimes in places like Bucha or Mariupol and deporting upwards of 1 million Ukrainians to Russia (Editorial Board, Washington Post 2022).

This maximalist goal not only threatens the existence of a European nation and people, but if successful, will decidedly empower Putin’s revisionist hand, making him even more willing to use Russia’s most effective foreign policy tool – total war – on subsequent European countries he deems in need of “de-Nazification.” It also threatens to demoralize those who uphold the principles of democratic governance – national sovereignty and territorial integrity – through the thuggish notion of might makes right. Proving that this idea of national annihilation is doomed to failure will signal the end of Putin’s neo-imperialist drive for Russian influence in areas like Eastern Europe and Central Asia, thereby stressing what the world first realized in 2008 (Dębski 2008) – his inability to attract political partnerships with a Russia that has little to offer the global community other than the use of force.

Rebuilding and reconstruction

Putin’s war has destabilized Ukraine, displaced millions internally (about 7 million) and externally (over 4 million) while claiming thousands of innocent lives. Shelling and rocket attacks destroyed critical infrastructure (roads, bridges, sea ports, electrical plants), residential homes and buildings, and important cultural assets (Piechowska 2022). With the war raging for four months now, these losses are estimated at over US\$90 billion, with that figure increasing by as much as US\$12 billion each week the war continues. The damage inflicted, especially the destruction of Ukraine crops and blockade of critical grain exports, is likely to cause Ukraine’s GDP (US\$200 billion in 2021 – the highest in its history) to drop by as much as 30-50 percent this year alone.

Uncertainty about the war's outcome is no excuse for avoiding discussions about the future. Whatever and whenever the end may be, financing Ukraine's reconstruction is the West's moral debt for defending the rules-based international order and European collective security. Western leaders are beginning to weigh options for tackling the greatest challenge Europe faces since the end of the Second World War.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal announced the creation of a government fund (The Economist 2022) to channel public and private sector business or institutional investments from the global community for financing a recovery project that will cost at least US\$600 billion. Some have suggested a Marshall Plan 2.0, intoning the US-sponsored post-war European recovery project (Polska Agencja Prasowa 2022). Proposals have been made by EU member states and Group of Seven (G7) countries (Blanchfield 2022) to sell frozen or seized assets of Russian oligarchs throughout the West (amounting to some US\$300 billion) to compensate war victims and to rebuild Ukraine, something officials in Kyiv support. While some have introduced legislation to sell sanctioned assets of Russian oligarchs (e.g., Canada), others debate the legal mechanisms necessary to do the same with seized Russian central bank reserves (Rappeport and Sanger 2022).



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Whether it be rebuilding physical infrastructure, strengthening critical supply chains, or diversifying future trade, putting big recovery ideas into practice is precisely what a Ukraine aligned with the West needs to be stable and viable. The prospects are critical to convince many to return home from what they hope is a temporary exile. An economically successful, sovereign Ukraine will ensure European security. Knowing this, the West must shepherd cooperation throughout the reconstruction process, while also making Ukraine ready for accession into the EU. This is precisely what von der Leyen envisioned when pitching her idea of a European recovery package for Ukraine (Bennett and Barigazzi 2022).

Russia will be an even less attractive partner for post-war Ukraine, which will likely continue the trend begun in 2014 of further turning westward (exports to the EU rose to 36 percent by 2020). A clearly defined pathway to EU membership should include a system of targets for Ukrainian governments to achieve as a means of closer economic restructuring with today's EU agenda and future policies – whether they be associated with the Green New Deal or more digital – with the goal of helping Ukraine not only recover but build a completely new economy in line with western standards.

Of course, this will demand its governments pursue more systemic reforms (e.g., transparent business practices and regulations with tighter anti-corruption laws, including uprooting oligarch state capture), if only to protect reparations from falling prey to internal rapacity. Like in the case of other post-Cold War Central European countries that sought integration into the EU, western partners like Canada and the US must fully and publicly support Ukraine's aspirations. Ukraine as an EU member will confirm that democracy and the free market economy can make Europe more free and unified. In no way should the prospect of EU membership be used to pressure Kyiv to sue for peace – doing so will only embolden Putin's aggression (Gibbons-Neff and Schmitt 2022).

Strengthening defence

If the 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine have proven anything, it's that as long as the Putin regime continues pursuing a neo-imperialist agenda of armed nationalist revanchism, war in Europe remains a reality. This should be enough to convince the West that broadening and increasing defence capabilities should not wait any longer.

Some promising steps are being made. Poland is investing more in its military, increasing defence spending to 3 percent of its GDP beginning in 2023 while continuing to modernize the interoperability of its forces, procuring F-35 fighter jets and 250 M1 Abrams tanks. Finland and Sweden have decided to shed their longstanding non-aligned status and join NATO, thereby strengthening critical Baltic-Scandinavian defences and the Alliance's northern Arctic front (Bildt 2022). The US and UK have proven their commitments to European security by not only providing Ukraine with valuable weapons (e.g., through the Biden Lend-Lease bill) (Wang 2022) and crucial intelligence allowing them to inflict serious losses on Russia, but also by replenishing military stocks of Central European allies supplying Ukraine (Beltran 2022). Even though changes in policy appeared in Germany – which pledged over US\$112 billion from the 2022 federal budget for the armed forces and committed to reaching the 2 percent GDP defence spending benchmark – partners like France and Italy are still reticent to conflate aiding Ukraine with boosting European security.

While reinforcing national capabilities remains important, fundamentally adjusting NATO's deterrence and defence posture is critical to European and transatlantic security. Doing so will allow the Alliance to meet possible territorial challenges or threats posed by a vengeful Putin, for example in the Baltics (Landsbergis 2022). Following the invasion of Ukraine, NATO increased its military presence on its Eastern Flank – where the defensive burden is being born – creating four new battle groups in addition to four existing ones in the region. However, completely filling so-called “security vacuums” must start with the political understanding that Putin's continuous hostility

toward the West (cyberattacks, election meddling, poisonings, armed aggression) definitively null and voided the *NATO-Russia Founding Act*, which self-imposed restrictions on NATO from deploying significant forces on the territory of new member states; these restrictions were conditioned on Russia observing the rules-based international order (Dyner, Kacprzyk, and Lorenz 2022).

NATO enlargement in 1999 upended ideas of Russia reestablishing a sphere of influence over Central and Eastern Europe. In the build-up to the 2022 invasion, Putin demanded NATO remove troops from this region and legally agree to limit support for defending partners neighbouring Russia; this amounted to another push for formal recognition of a Russian sphere. Invading Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014, 2022) is evidence of how far Putin is willing to go to carve out that sphere and it shouldn't be ruled out that he'll intensify aggression, risking a future conflict or direct confrontation with the Alliance to achieve this goal.

Furthermore, maintaining military self-restraints stipulated in the *NATO-Russia Founding Act* will only encourage Russia to continue its aggressive posture toward the Alliance while working to undermine allied political cohesion. Ensuring European territorial security requires NATO recognizing Russia as a long-term threat, rejecting the *Founding Act*, and adopting a forward defence posture to assure the permanent presence of critical forces capable of collectively defending Alliance territory in vulnerable eastern areas (Lorenz 2022).

Energy independence

As the war in Ukraine has shown, securing European energy away from dependence on Russian resources is a vital challenge for the future of transatlantic security. Reliance for natural gas and crude oil imports from Russia (about 40 percent and 36 percent, respectively) allowed Putin to weaponize energy and bankroll hydrocarbon revenues to fund his war-making capabilities. EU fossil fuel imports following Russia's invasion of Ukraine totalled US\$47 billion in two months. Putin used the threat of stopping transit of these critical supplies to blackmail Ukraine in the past. Since February 24, Russia limited or cut off gas transit to several European countries (Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Poland) (Pokharel and Thompson 2022; Reed 2022) that refused to meet Putin's demands of paying for supplies in Russian rubles in response to the West's banking sanctions and the threat of imposing an oil embargo on Russian crude. However, some European buyers have acquiesced to a new payment scheme, thereby funding Putin's war machine in Ukraine (Harlan, Chico and Stefano 2022).

Aggression in Ukraine and gas shut offs strengthened support of EU independence from Russian energy. Even though the EU agreed to a partial ban

on Russian oil imports (part of its sixth sanctions package) (Kirby 2022), difficulties in reaching a unanimous consensus on imposing a total energy embargo (opposition by some member states such as Germany and Hungary) forced the EU to pursue a policy of gradually reducing purchases of Russian gas (Zaniewicz 2022). Some countries, particularly those in Central Europe, have made investments in gas infrastructure (terminals, pipelines, interconnectors, storage facilities, terminals) with the goal of ceasing Russian imports by 2023.

In the long-term, Putin will likely find it more difficult to seek alternative buyers for gas – unlike with crude oil (Madhok 2022) – largely because exports are reliant on networks of pipelines and interconnectors. However, existing infrastructure deficiencies not only limit possibilities of transporting gas from West European terminals east, but will not completely replace imports of Russian gas via pipelines. In the short-term, Europe must agree to maintain minimum gas reserves and seek support from western partners (i.e., Canada, the US) toward supplying energy needs. In efforts to diversify away from Russia, Ukrainian energy consortiums are already in the process of reaching understandings with Canadian companies to purchase LNG and green liquid hydrogen (Pekic 2022). Furthermore, investments in transmission infrastructure – terminals and pipelines connecting the EU with new suppliers – will enable Europe to secure its energy independence without losing sight of transitioning to more renewable energy sources in the long-term future.

Relations with Russia

A crucial problem facing Europe and the West will be how to engage and align future relations with Russia. There are no plans for reconstructing it along the post-war German or Japanese models. Chances of an internal coup against Putin are slim although not completely out of the realm of possibility (Knight 2022). Even so, a change in the Kremlin is more likely to see a revisionist acolyte, with a background akin to Putin's, replace him rather than a liberal democrat – the majority being either political prisoners or in exile. Barring any health complications or major internal shifts putting the Kremlin in crisis, it is likely that the Putin regime will live on. This means continued efforts at further destabilizing Ukraine and Europe by meddling in elections, sowing disinformation, and exploiting divisions to weaken NATO and the EU.

Ideas of returning to a *status quo ante* with Putin are out of the question. Defeats on the battlefield humiliated Russia. Although internationally isolated, the Kremlin still has like-minded sympathizers willing to collaborate with it. Acts of plunder and brutal war crimes committed against civilians, if unpunished, show that it will be keen to commit them against Slavic brothers-turned-enemies again. The West should maintain or even increase its

strict sanctions regime until it sees signs of real internal reforms take place. However, containing a wounded Russia bent on strengthening itself at all costs – whether by reforming it into a regional East European or Eurasian, or a broader European order – will be a politically difficult challenge. These frameworks are precisely what Putin has set out to not only overturn but destroy and replace with a new authoritarian order – one more reminiscent of high Stalinism with fascist overtone.

Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the first war of conquest involving European territory since 1939. It has brought an end to the calm era of growth and stability, forcing the West to adapt to changes and challenges ahead. Putin's war set in motion a wave of forces that will undoubtedly change Europe, for better or worse, over the next decade. It has proven that the continent is not safe from a regime bent on destabilizing and reordering it through the use of total war.

Historically, Russia vacillates between periods of Western-style reform and autocracy. It appears that Europe is likely looking at a long period of the latter. A weakened and humiliated Putin only makes him more unpredictable and aggressive. Only a total defeat can shake the majority of Russians from their lethargy of supporting Putin's flawed neo-imperialist ideology. Strong states on Russia's periphery supported by partners and allies in Western Europe are critical to any ideas for containing an ever dangerous Russia. Long-term US and UK commitment to European security will be key in leading the strengthening of territorial defence and deterrence on the continent.

For the West, guiding and helping Ukraine rebuild to put itself in a position to defeat future Russian aggression is critical. Ukraine's membership in the EU is the best way to shed the "post-Soviet" epithet it still bears, transitioning it from the East European grey zone that Putin believes he can dominate. It is precisely Ukraine's democratic processes that Putin sees as a threat to his authoritarian rule at home. Reconstructing a prosperous Ukraine integrated into Europe's economy will prove to the world the power and appeal of democracy and free trade. Achieving this means preventing European unity from waning and breaching a division that is forming between those who wish to see Russia pushed back and punished and others seeking to end the war quickly to minimize further human damage and economic instability (Erlanger 2022).

The war caused an important reconfiguration in Europe's political, security, and economic image. For the foreseeable future, attitudes toward Russia will be the key factor determining Western unity and the strength of partnerships and alliances. The timid response by Germany or France to Russia's war in Ukraine means that the burden of leading Europe in a perilous time has

fallen to the continent's eastern periphery. From day one, Central Europeans (e.g., Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Romania) showed not only their readiness to confront the Putin regime and a shared commitment to protecting democracy and key European values, but also their investment in seeing Ukraine win. Combined with increasing cooperation with the US and UK, this signals the makings of a strategic power shift (Michta 2022) in which the region lying between the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Seas – including Ukraine – will constitute Europe's core into the future.

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